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PREPARATIONS FOR THE SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOR THE PURPOSE OF AN OVERALL REVIEW AND APPRAISAL OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AGENDA 21

DIALOGUE SESSIONS WITH MAJOR GROUPS

Summary report of the dialogue session with farmers

(16 April 1997)

Chairman: Ms. Monika Linn-Locher (Switzerland), Vice-Chairman, Commission on Sustainable Development

Facilitator: Ms. Linda Elswick, World Sustainable Agriculture Association, United States of America

Presenters: Farmers representing the following organizations made presentations: Federation of Swedish Farmers; Danish Farmers' Union; National Farmers' Union, Canada; Zambian Women in Agriculture; Union Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos, Nicaragua; New Brunswick Federation of Agriculture, Canada; Centre for Citizens Initiative - Moscow, Russian Federation; and Karnataka State Farmers Association, India.

PRESENTATIONS

The Earth Summit had heightened awareness of important links among farming, environment and development. Farmers have a greater awareness of their environmental responsibilities to society, are increasingly addressing environmental impacts of their practices as well as identifying and carrying out solutions. Issues concerning food and agriculture transformed the abstract concept of sustainable development into something tangible and meaningful to all

people. Farm manag ment and res urce conservation, technological developments, land tenure trade, and the r le of wome were ju t a fe of the many issues that surfaced in the discussion betw en farmers nd Governments.

Activities

Farmers are underta ing initia ives to promote sustainable agricu ture. Some o these activities are indicat d below.

- A voluntary farm programme in Denmark en a ed artic pants at nation l an local levels, a d allowed rmers to view the selves as an integrated p rt of society. That programme educated farmers and promoted good farming practi es. The progr mme also esta lished standards for pesticide an fertilizer us , animal manure, water quality, ener consumption nd research. It was carried out thr ugh a combination of far er participation in the regulatory pr cess and support of consumers.

- Various other programmes such as environmental far plans based on self-evaluation, eco-audits and codes of good farm practice have been i iti te (Canada, Sweden).

- ambian w men hav organized a programme for women farmer that has empowered women and ducated them about sustainable farming prac ices and management.

- With the help of an Ame ican non-g vernmental organization, a group in th Russian Federation dev loped a consultative process for farmers, with a particular fo us o women farmers. That programme educated both producers an consumers about sustainable agriculture.

- Land tenure reforms, agricultural cooperatives, rural banks and rur l women's services have helped in creating a sup o tive economic and social framework for sustaina le agriculture in several countri s.

Obstacles

O stacles faced by farmers concern povert and low farm income, lack of land tenure, trade policies and titudes towards biological diversity. Examples are given below.

- Farme s, hist r cally, have been viewed a people who explo t the l nd.

- In ecure lan tenure and pov rty, government eglect and lack of investment in rural areas undermine sustainable farmin efforts, specia ly in developing count ies.

- Low net farm i comes force farmers to consider only the short-term an not to take nto account the long-term effects of their activities on he environment. Furthermore, such low prospects do not attract young people int farming, which is leading to an agein farming popu ation (in industri lized countries) or th feminization of a riculture (in developing countries).

- Policies that favour cash crop producti n can lead to unsustainab e agriculture.

- The W rld Trade Or anization and trade liberalization have create a watershed of adverse effects on farmers. The global market is determining wh t is produc d, who is produ ing it nd who has control over what is produced. Glob lization of the economy has also usurped the place of instruments for ensur ng food security, and moved decision m king out i e of public institutions.

  For some countries, barriers to ex ort, especially escalating tariffs n proce se and semi-processed agricultural products, have detrimental effects on their agricultu al activities and deny them the opportunity to d ve op domestic agro-industrial processing.

- Farmers find it difficult to participate in the international arena for a variety of reasons, inclu i g financial constraints.

  Vested inte ests 'n industrialized co ntries refus to recognize p sants and indigenous peoples as generators, ow ers and guardians of biodiversit .

- The spread of urban and 'ndustrial ar as threatens prime agricultural land.

- Organ c farming receives little attention and recognition from government.

Priorities

- Priorities outlined y armers address environm ntally s und farming technique , land tenure, partner hips and trade. Examples are set for below.

- Identifying problem using local knowledge and seeking local solutions and long-term land tenure are impe ative for sustainable agriculture.

- Agricultur is a long-term business. Farmers, there ore, eed a long-term, predictable pers ective nd olicy environment in which to work.

  Farm rs a not pursue sustainabl agriculture alone. lose coopera ion between f rme s and authorities is essential in establishin a legislative framewor in such areas as the use of ma ure, fe tilizer and pestici es, animal inten ity, and rot cted n tural a eas.

- Research is important for furthering the use of agricultural practices. Consequently, farmers should enhance alliances with sci ntific and technical institutions.

- Improved dialogue with agro-industry, environmental and conservation groups and with consumer associations is also necessary.

- The effects of trade liberalization on farmers require greater attention.

DIALOGUE

Representatives of the following Governments made statements during the dialogue session: Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Peru, Philippines, United States of America. Farmers and representatives of non-governmental organizations from the floor also took part in the discussion.

One organic farmer called for increased attention to organic farming (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM)). He pointed out the increased demand for organic farming products in Austria, Switzerland and Denmark. The representative of a non-governmental organization noted that the Commission on the Status of Women supported farmers, especially organic farmers. She pointed to references to organic farming by the Fourth World Conference on Women. These references stress linkages between health and agriculture.

Although changes in production methods could lead to extra costs for farmers, a panellist noted that there are win-win situations where, for example, a reduction in the use of inputs through better management practices leads to a decrease both in costs and in the impact on the environment. Another panellist added that environmentally friendly production methods also make good business sense, since consumers are increasingly demanding that agricultural production take the environment into consideration.

Several speakers emphasized problems associated with the World Trade Organization and trade liberalization. One non-governmental organization representative said that farmer marketing boards, backed by Governments, were essential for family farmers. Yet such boards are currently being challenged by the World Trade Organization (Canadian farmer). Another representative of a non-governmental organization (Bolivia) called for protection of rural farmers against free market forces. One government representative suggested that globalization responded to consumer demands by establishing lower prices. As an example, he pointed to decreased prices after his Government had joined the European Union (Finland). A farmer pointed out that not all farmers were benefiting from the so-called free trade (farmer from Nicaragua). Even when they wish to export their products, there are still trade barriers and the dumping of subsidized products continues to threaten the livelihoods of domestic products.

One participant noted that the Commission on Sustainable Development in its documentation had failed to mention the Leipzig International Technical Conference on Plant Genetic Resources, efforts of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and initiatives under the Convention on Biological Diversity relevant to agriculture (India). She and others emphasized links between biodiversity and agriculture, biosafety issues and the threat of technological totalitarianism.

One government representative asked how farmers reconciled their roles as business people and guardians of the earth, especially in the third world. He asked about the possibility of having these two roles coincide, especially in the third world (Germany). A panellist responded that legislation was required to help mesh the farmer's different roles. A farmer representing a third world

Government called attention to the fact that environmental subsidies in one country can impact on another country's agricultural sector annihilating peasant households and small-scale agriculture. One government representative considered that the trade rules needed to be rewritten to encourage sustainable agriculture (India).

One government representative asked whether the world's farmers would be capable of feeding the increasing world population. In response, farmers noted the role of technology and local agriculture. One non-governmental organization representative pointed out that the question was one concerning not the quantity of food, but rather its distribution.

One government representative recognized the negative public image of farmers in some countries. He asked whether farmer/consumer group partnerships would be productive (Ireland). A panellist suggested that what consumers said and what they bought were two different matters. Farmers will produce what consumers want. In some cases, they have to be prepared to pay higher prices for food products.

One representative noted that many people in rural communities were landless but contributed to food production as farm workers. He urged Governments to address hunger and undernourishment and stressed that each household unit must be able to meet daily food requirements (Philippines).

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Some challenges and recommendations are presented below.

- The international community should take a more comprehensive approach to food security by involving representatives from all sectors of society.

- Farmers' organizations should be included in national delegations attending meetings that discuss issues related to the agricultural sector.

- Increased interaction between the United Nations and the World Trade Organization is needed.

- The Commission on Sustainable Development should facilitate approval of the Global Plan of Action and the International Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources as a protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity. This requires immediate finalization of the revision to the International Undertaking as a protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

- There is a need to review, assess and, if necessary, modify existing national legislation and international agreements concerning intellectual property rights, land tenure and seed legislation (also post-World Trade Organization legislation) to ensure that they support and do not run counter to farmers' rights and to the overarching objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

- The WTO review process in 1999-2000 should lea to remo al of agriculture from the Uruguay Round of multila eral trade negotiations agreemen s and to the elimination of trade-rela ed intellectual property rights (TRIP) in agriculture.

- There should be a moratorium on bioprospecting activities, as well as on the release of genetically modified plant varieties and organisms.

- Developed countries and agribusinesses hould provide compensation for the developing-country knowledge and resources that they have been using for many years.

- The Commission on Sustainable Development should promote the establishment of a permanent working group on farmers' rights, biodiversity and sustainable agriculture.

- An international convention to address farmer's rights and sustainable agriculture issues would help to build accountability within the structure of international law.

- The Commission on Sustainable Development should arrange for consultative status for farmers as a major group by the time of the special session of the General Assembly.

- Farmers' organizations, specially those from the developing countries and in countries in transition, should be supported and strengthened to become effective partners in policy design and implementation.

- Public research on sustainable farming practices, improved cropping methods and extension services should be increased at all levels.